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ABSTRACT

Women in Nepal are empowered through adult functional literacy programs called Non Formal Education (NFE). The NFE classes are held six nights per week using discussion and group socialization processes that develop critical thinking and build self-esteem in a society in which women have few or no legal rights. In these programs, women gain life-sustaining skills and develop the confidence to make decisions affecting them and their families. Self-confident women can be the implementers and brokers of their own programs where they express their views on their rights as citizens of Nepal and as confident adults in the world. However, summative evaluation of the NFE classes can pose barriers to women's empowerment because external evaluators do not understand that the women gain life skills and control of their lives even if they do not retain all their literacy skills in the long term. (KC)

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"Not What Is But What Can Be"
Women Empowerment and Adult Functional Literacy

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"The women were sewing in the newly based women's group. They chatted quietly as their fingers moved over the cloth. The host answered, the women know no 'problems'. They only know 'what is'. The host explained that it might take months of sitting, sewing and talking before women begin to realize that 'what is' could be defined as a problem and that 'what is' could develop into 'what can be' ".

As reported by Gwen Crawley in Monday Morning, millions of women around the world are caught in 'what is'. In Nepal it is most clearly expressed in a song entitled OUR LIFE.

I get up early at down,
Sweep the house and the rooms
Scrub the porch and the threshold
Go to water– well to fetch water,
Grind or unhusk the corn
And begin to kindle fire.
Thus I work in the kitchen,

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Prepare food, feed the family
And wash all the plates and pots,
Picking up all the dirty clothes
I go to the water spring to wash
Though we work so many household chores
People say.
Our work does not look like work.
We have no work at all, Ah!

– – –

We dig fields and hoe the clods,
We take manure to the field,
Go to forest to collect leaves and twigs
To cover the sheds.
We give hands in harvest
Work as hired hands in labor exchange
Reap the harvest and carry it home,
We work and work
Through sun and shower
Though we work some people say
Our work is not work at all
We have no work at all, Ah!

– – –

I am penniless and suppress all desires,
Eat leftovers and wear cast offs
When I get ill, I suppress the ailments
I have many things within
But will not let lips burst it forth
I go with the head hung down
Looking nowhere but only at the ground
So I pass my life
Under domination and fright

Though we live such a life
People say
We are no humans,
We must not have any meaning Ah!
We are no more humans,
And should not have any regards Ah!

– – –

"Women hold up one half the sky" according to the Chinese proverb, yet this marginalized and significant group are often forgotten in development plans except as recipients of development aid. Women are often identified as the reference group or target of the funding proposals, yet women are not expected to be the implementors or power brokers. All too frequently, when decision making positions or control of the funding decisions are made, women are excluded because they are not literate, not present and not in position as decisions are made. Therefore, it is assumed that women cannot be empowered to implement programs which are meant to effect their lives profoundly.

One example of this occurred when a major donor was going to implement a program in Nepal which had as one of its goals the "empowerment of women". One objective of the program was to put money into the hands of women in the rural areas. The program was designed to build up the infrastructure so that local banks could be used to provide funds through Non Government Groups (NGOs) in the area. In the discussion, several women requested the funding agency to use some of the Non Formal Education programs, as one of the NGOs so that the women, the beneficiaries of the proposal, could actually be involved in implementing the program. The main objection was that women in the Non Formal Education programs were non- literate. The request fell on deaf ears and unseeing eyes.

An even worse situation is that some development planners and/or donors are in the process of now concluding that adult literacy programs are not leading to the empowerment of women. This conclusion could lead to the end of one of the few programs that are sanctioned by the community and the family, and functioning to empower women. If the programs have an intentional bias to increase awareness of women, it can lead to empowerment. Not all literacy programs are empowering but appropriately planned and implemented adult functional literacy programs are one of the most practical methods in the present context of Nepal's political and economic situation to empower women.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

At the outset I would like to briefly define the terms of reference used in this paper. Being literate refers to achieving a level of competence in reading, writing and doing everyday math. Functional literacy refers to reading, writing, doing everyday math and acquiring a series of competencies in life enhancing skills: care of the children and family; care of animals and the environment; increased production and use of locally produced nutritious food in the diet; hygiene; sanitation; use of a smokeless stove and income producing skills. Assisting women to identify and discuss their role and relationships in society is a key aspect of functional literacy programs and increases women's awareness to their condition.

Adult literacy and adult functional literacy programs are generally called Non Formal Education. Non Formal Education (NFE) is a new label for an old collection of activities and is the term used to refer to almost all adult literacy programs in Nepal. NFE can be used to refer to an adult literacy class of six- nine months duration or a combined multi- year program of three years. In a multi- year program, the first year is spent in basic literacy combined with community awareness raising. The second year is used for follow- up functional literacy classes, increasing life skills and the development of reading centers (local libraries). Year three is for community development activities. In Nepal there are as many hybrids of the above as there are organizations and/or groups involved in NFE.

For program purposes, Non Formal Education activities are planned, organized experiences. They are intentional and systematic experiences that are of practical value and directed to increase the competence and dignity of the learner. These Non Formal Education activities are usually short term programs organized outside of the formal system and not restricted to time and place. Non Formal Education activities are often used to enhance people's participation in development and to enable people to gain control over processes and systems which affect their lives. Appropriate NFE activities are empowering.

The basic textbook for almost all classes is Naya Goreto, the official adult literacy book of His Majesty's Government of Nepal. It is based on forty "pictures" which are used as discussion "starters" leading to the identification of the "key word" for the literacy content of the lesson. After nearly fifteen years' of use, Naya Goreto is still the text of choice although there have been attempts to use other methods such as the "learner generated method" or the "whole language method".

Any methodology has its limitations but Naya Goreto used in a purposeful, systematic approach with clear goals, good training, follow- up supervision and a women's awareness component can lead to the empowerment of women. The women's awareness component at a minimum must include: stated goals within the program to focus on women's concerns; focused group discussions on women's concerns; organizing of women's group; and a program bias to hire women workers from the facilitator level to the highest level of staff. Each activity must be developed with a focus on women.

SOCIAL CONTEXT

An underlying concept of Non Formal Education programs in Nepal is based on the premise that women are adults who know how to do things and know how to survive under the most adverse conditions. However, it is also important to identify the social context of women in Nepal.

According to the 1991 census, 25% of the women are literate as compared to 55% for men and 39% overall. Almost 70% of girls entering primary school drop out before reaching class five. The legal age for marriage in Nepal is sixteen years for girls and eighteen for men, and although now rare in the urban area, it is not uncommon to find daughters being married under sixteen years of age in the rural areas. Infant mortality has been halved in the last generation. Maternal mortality (one death per two hundred live births) is still one of the highest in the world. It is estimated that there are 300,000 Nepali young women sex workers in large Indian cities. Tragically, fathers and brothers have been involved in selling their daughters and sisters to 'middle men'.

There are few to no legal rights for women and although theoretically illegal, it is not uncommon for rural men to have two wives (jethi and kanchhi swasni), the first wife and the youngest wife. Women are considered to belong to their father when they are born and then considered the property of their husband and his family after marriage. It is not uncommon to hear of marriages being planned so that a new "household worker", the bride, can be added to the working force of the household.

In addition to improvement of women, various studies have indicated the positive affect on women and their families as a result of participation in adult literacy programs. Women who participate in adult functional literacy classes usually have healthier families; their daughters go to school and have an increased life span. In one working area in Nepal where literacy is combined with an integrated health and community development program, the literacy rate for girls in

primary school (up to class five) increased from 7% in 1995 to 50% in 1995. In another area, it is estimated that girls enrollment in primary school increased from 1% in 1975 to 30% in 1995. In this second area, the infant mortality rate declined from 200 per 1000 live births to 30 per 1000 live births and the fertility rate decreased from 2.5% to 1.5%.

During 1995, there were approximately 600,000 participants enrolled in some form of NFE program in Nepal. Unfortunately, even with that impressive number, as the population grows, more classes will be needed each year until the formal education system is able to enroll and keep children in school, particularly girls.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

In this context, a sanctioned system which allows and encourages women (wives and mothers) to go to Non Formal Education classes can be a powerful force in women empowerment. No woman is currently participating in a Non Formal Education class against the wishes of her husband or his family.

"In 1992, I went to observe the first night of a literacy class in a village one hour by road away from Kathmandu.

Slowly women from the village came in and huddled around the kerosene lanterns. The class was held on the second floor of a mud house. There was only one tiny window and a doorway.

Just as the class was ready to start one women entered with her sari tucked over her face so that only her eyes could be seen. She came with her eight year old son. She sat with her back to the class, filled only with her neighbors and a village "facilitator". She did not dare to look up. Her son talked for her.

I returned one month later. This women was now in front of the class, talking about the picture and asking questions of her "classmate friends". She was emboldened and empowered to speak aloud in front of her class."

This is a long way from empowerment but it is a major step in the right direction. The picture under discussion for the first month of her class was "building a house". The key word for the literacy component was "kaam" or work.

If the program has a focus to empower women, the discussion goes deeply into "who" in the family does "what" in building a house. The discussion starts with questions such as: "what do you see? Who is doing what? What are the women doing? What are the men doing? Can the women do what the men are doing? Why? Why not? Does this happen in your village? How do you learn? How did others learn? Can you do what others are doing? If not, why not?"

In the discussion women indicate that they are not able to do the skilled jobs of laying the bricks. They say, "women can't do it". When they are asked why, they answer, "because". Then when they are asked how their husbands learned, they say, "the men watched their fathers". When pressed, "Did you watch your father?" They reply, "We did but are not allowed to do that skilled work."

Another lesson in Naya Goreto which leads to awareness raising is one with two women and a man outside a family home. In the discussion, women identify this as a situation with two wives. Further questions reveal the deep hurt, disillusionment and the realization that the first wife has few to no legal rights. After the discussion about two wives in a family, many women stated that they would not allow their son to have two wives. They also said they would not allow their daughter to be married to a man who is already married.

Another important feature of empowerment is to use pictures of Nepali women involved in activities which lead to a lively "hot discussion". The following picture was widely used in Nepal as a focus for women awareness raising activities.

It causes some difficulties for the women. Usually they do not initially understand why the rope is around the woman's foot. It is even more interesting to deal with the feelings and reservations of the educated staff. They expressed, "The picture with a rope around the leg and the gag on the mouth is not real. It does not occur in real life."

However, in deeper discussions with rural village women, they begin to tell their own stories. They begin to see that even though they could talk, they were not expected to talk. They also discussed the meaning of the rope as they interpreted the picture. "Yes we can move into certain areas where it is socially acceptable. We must do our daily duties: haul water, collect firewood and go to the fields to work, but we are not allowed to go to any other place without permission. Usually we would not even ask to go any where else".

Another perplexing picture that provoked hot discussion was the picture of a woman on her knees, with her hands tied in front. On her back were pictures of large volumes of books.

The illustration was first used in Nepal in a workshop conducted by Kamala Bhasin, one of Asia's most dynamic workshop leaders. But it has been reworked so many times, that it is difficult to give appropriate credit for its true origin. Depending on the group, the book titles are changed. Usually the titles include the "Muluki Ain", a book of old codifying laws of Nepal and traditionally repressive to women, the Bhagavad Gita, sometimes the Bible, and other titles relating to the society. The use of this picture provokes lively discussion among the participants, whether they are village workers or senior development staff.

Another successful "tool" used to increased women's awareness in Non Formal Education was the production, release and use of the audio cassette, "Jiwanko Jimmewari" (Responsibility of Life). Nepal is basically an oral society; therefore, unlike most non- oral societies, the people have developed their oral capacities. A song, if in the appropriate norms: folk style, strophic and repetitive, can easily be understood, learned and sung by the group in a short time. The group is not dependent on the written words. Often the use of audio cassette incorporates use of the "whole language methodology" in which the song words are written on pieces of cloth and the facilitator or member of the class points to the word as the song is sung and played.

The most effective use is to introduce the song or play the tape. Immediately, there is a hush in the group as they realize the song has meaning for them. Following the playing of the song, questions are asked of the group: "What did you hear? What has happened? Do you know someone like that? Has that happened here? To whom? Has it happened to you?"

READING ENVIRONMENT

The reading environment in Nepal is limited, even among many educated urbanites. Books and periodicals are read in order to do one's work or to get a better job. Rarely, do people read for enjoyment; therefore, children do not see the act of reading as a "normal" enjoyable activity. One approach that was developed to increase the reading environment and to promote women's awareness was the development of the Pipal Pustak (Pipal Tree Books) series. Pipal books are stories of women. The books are produced by recording life stories of people in their own words by a scribe. Then the text is edited slightly, illustrated and printed in an attractive format. The series is

designed to increase readers' awareness of other peoples situation, of ethnic and cultural diversity and the power and importance of choice.
The series includes stories about women who have solved problems, who have been helped through literacy or about women who have learned a skill and are earning income to take care of their family. One of the most popular books is "Natra Bhane" in which a mother tells her daughter how to deal with her recent marriage where the husband always gave commands to do something "or else".

One book "Free from Guilt" relates the story of a young woman who had been lured into leaving home to become a sex worker in Calcutta. One night out of her family home in eastern Nepal she faced the reality that she would be placed in a brothel as a sex worker. She returned home, sadder but wiser. The situation has not changed much in her life but she is more aware and talks to other young girls to help them realize that they should not run away.

These examples have been used to illustrate how an NFE program can be used to empower women. The NFE class is the medium through which women come together six nights a week. A most significant factor is that women attend class as a group. With the sanction of their husbands and mothers- in- law, they become a social group that can be empowered. In the group they ask questions about their life and draw strength in that others have similar questions. There they discuss experiences of inequality, oppression and begin to analyze the effect that society and culture have made on their lives. Then they begin to draw conclusions about what could be, not only "what is". Within the group, they are allowed, indeed encouraged to laugh, play, talk, read, write and utilize the whole range of emotions that others use in the "real" world including speaking out against the system. It will take a long time for women to become fully empowered but the first dangerous step has been taken.

In one area of Nepal, the women of the NFE class mobilized after it became known that one of their class members had all her jewelry taken away by her father- in- law. The jewelry ornaments are almost the sole possession of married women. The women in the class went as a group to the home to "demand" that the ornaments be given back to the woman. The father- in- law was quite surprised and also angry.

However, after a full discussion and with the admission of an error on the part of the daughter- in- law, the jewelry was returned. There was some local opposition but in the end, the program continued. The women had taken a small step forward on the road to empowerment.

In order for NFE programs to continue to empower women there will always be a need to have central level administrators who have the responsibility to interact, if necessary, in program decisions. Far too often, it is easier to replace female staff with male staff and only through the insistence of top administrators will people continue to seek female staff. This does not mean that this monitoring needs to be done by women, it just needs to be done. Far too often, leadership positions change after two to three years. Policies need to be adopted which insure the continuance of women's concerns including placement of women in senior staff positions of the project..

THREATS TO EMPOWERMENT

A serious threat to women empowerment through adult functional literacy programs are the post- mortem program evaluators who are not able to see the change occurring in the lives of people. Summative program evaluations are often conducted by outsiders, consultants who do not fully understand the language or customs and rarely have adopted a women's empowerment focus. Such evaluations must be conducted very wisely so that in the zeal to indicate the efficiency of the program, the evaluation does not lead to the demise of the most powerful tool in Nepal for the development of women today, the NFE program.

Often the evaluations are limited to the ability of women to read standard material. It is unlikely that women who complete a "normal" Non Formal Education program will remain literate to a set standard until the reading environment improves. But women are being empowered even if they cannot successfully complete the post- mortem evaluations of reading words and sentences five years later.

A second serious threat comes from donors who share their resources by giving unsupervised "pass through" funds. These funds are often given to non government organizations (NGOs) who may not have developed programs that are able to motivate their workers nor sustain their staff through the long hard work of walking, talking, working, and sleeping in village home after village home throughout the mountains of Nepal. Thus, after large sums of funds are delivered to such NGOs, there appears to be little effect and donor groups move on to some "new" development paradigms, without recognizing that the problem was one of selection of appropriate groups able to implement programs. Another problem is in failing to recognize the time required to implement complex programs involving repetitive tasks in difficult remote environments requiring motivation and maintenance.

During a five year follow- up of literacy activities, one women in western Nepal told the interviewer, "I don't know what those marks on the page mean. I never really did. But come and see. My kitchen is clean. I have a smokeless stove that I use. There is a kitchen garden full of vegetables. My family uses the latrine. My daughters go to school and I get a little extra income from weaving which means my husband listens to me more".

It will take a long time for women to change "what is" to "what can be". External interventions in the form of planned, focused activities can increase women's awareness. These focused activities can short circuit years of sewing and chatting.

SUMMARY

Women are empowered in Nepal through adult functional literacy programs called Non Formal Education (NFE). The NFE classes are held six nights a week using discussion and group socialization processes which develop critical thinking and build self esteem in a society where women have few to no legal rights. In these programs, women gain life sustaining skills and develop self confidence to make decisions affecting themselves and their families. Self confident women can be the implementors and power brokers of their own programs where they express their views on their rights as citizens of Nepal and as confident adults in the world.